



## GOAL 7: Right-to-Know

*Artwork by Crystal*

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## **GOAL 7: EXPANSION OF AMERICANS' RIGHT-TO-KNOW ABOUT THEIR ENVIRONMENT**

**Easy access to a wealth of information about the state of their local environment will expand citizen involvement and give people tools to protect their families and their communities as they see fit. Increased information exchange between scientists, public health officials, businesses, citizens, and all levels of government will foster greater knowledge about the environment and what can be done to protect it.**

### **OVERVIEW**

EPA's Right-to-Know goal reflects the Agency's commitment to provide information that will help protect human health and safeguard the natural environment. All Americans have a right to know about the safety of the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the food they eat. Access to current, accurate, and understandable information enhances the public's ability to participate in environmental decision-making, helps the public to reduce its exposure to harmful pollutants, and increases the ability of EPA's partners—Federal, State, Tribal, and local—to address environmental problems. EPA's commitment to environmental equity necessitates the availability of information for minority, low-income communities whose residents suffer disproportionately from poor environmental conditions.

In addition to making progress toward the goal, EPA environmental information activities in FY 1999 contributed to a number of cross-Agency priorities, including children's health, environmental justice, addressing persistent bioaccumulative toxics (PBTs), and broad-based sector work. Recognizing the important role that the achievement of this goal plays in effective environmental management, EPA created a new Office of Environmental Information in FY 1999. The new organization will help the Agency collect, manage, and disseminate data and information more efficiently; respond to public information needs more effectively; and use environmental information as a strategic resource.

In its Strategic Plan, EPA established three objectives that contribute to the expansion of Americans' Right-to-Know: empower the public with environmental information that helps them participate in environmental protection efforts;

assist the public in reducing exposure to environmental and human health risks by providing information on specific pollutants; and enhance the ability of EPA's partners to address environmental problems by providing better, more complete environmental information.

### **FY 1999 PERFORMANCE**

#### **Empowering the Public with Environmental Information**

By 2005, EPA will improve the ability of the American public to participate in the protection of human health and the environment by increasing the quality and quantity of general environmental education and outreach and data availability programs, especially in disproportionately impacted and disadvantaged communities.

Recent advances in technology have created opportunities for collecting, managing, and disseminating information. Together, EPA and the States harness the latest technologies to exchange and integrate environmental information more efficiently than ever before. At the same time, EPA reaches out to individuals through its Website and the National Telephone Survey to identify and respond to public information needs more effectively.

EPA programs and the States often collect and manage data using different standards, formats, and protocols. This lack of coordination complicates information integration and consolidation and limits the ability of the public to gather facility- and area-specific information. Through establishment of the State/EPA Information Management Workgroup, EPA and the States have committed to share environmental information based on compatible data standards and to develop and implement joint

environmental data standards. The Workgroup has completed work on the data standards for facility identification and date designation. Work currently is proceeding on standards for latitude/longitude, industrial classification, chemical identity, and biological taxonomy. EPA plans to implement these six data standards in 13 major databases by the end of FY 2003.

The One Stop Reporting Program encourages State-to-State collaboration in addressing environmental information issues and needs. One Stop grants are awarded to State environmental agencies that are on the leading edge of environmental information management reform. The Program focuses on streamlining reporting by regulated entities and ultimately improving the availability of environmental performance data to the public. *The Agency did not meet its FY 1999 goal of adding eight States to the roster of those participating in the One Stop Reporting Program (four States were added) primarily because States had not demonstrated the required level of information integration (APG 44).* EPA has added a technology transfer activity to help additional States meet the One Stop Reporting eligibility criteria. The 25 States now participating in the program are implementing major environmental management systems that will provide better integrated, more accessible information.

FY 1999's four new One Stop Program participants—California, Michigan, Nebraska, and Virginia—used the EPA grants to further develop integrated environmental information systems. Also in FY 1999, EPA brought several States together to develop a common Facility Identification Template for States (FITS), and 35 States now plan information systems incorporating this new data standard ([http://www.sso.org/ecos/projects/EIM/fits\\_2.htm](http://www.sso.org/ecos/projects/EIM/fits_2.htm)). The availability of FITS has already cut State costs by an average of \$300,000 per data model. When fully implemented, the new One Stop information systems will enhance decision-making at the State and local levels, increase public access to information, and help reduce State and industry reporting burdens.

The Environmental Justice Grants Program includes the Environmental Justice Small Grants Program and the State and Tribal Environmental

Justice Grants Program. *EPA met its targeted FY 1999 goal by awarding 100 environmental justice grants (APG 45)* to eligible community groups, enhancing their ability to address pressing environmental problems (see related sidebar). The grants also supported State and Tribal efforts to develop the capacity needed to address a broad range of environmental justice issues.

#### **THE COALITION TO END LEAD POISONING, INC. GET THE LEAD OUT! ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE EMPOWERMENT PROJECT**

With the support of a \$20,000 EPA Environmental Justice Grant, the Coalition to End Lead Poisoning, Inc. provides residents of Baltimore, Maryland with information and resources to combat lead poisoning. The Coalition has developed a lead-safe housing registry in Baltimore and conducted numerous training sessions to help families minimize lead exposure. It also provides High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filtration vacuum cleaners and lead-dust cleaning kits to residents in at-risk communities. The Coalition works in partnership with CLEARCorps—an AmeriCorps program focused on Community Lead Education and Reduction—and continues to receive strong community support.

The Agency met its FY 1999 goals for increasing public access to information via the Internet. The number of Website hits increased by 42 percent. At the same time, EPA increased the number of Internet site pages by 41 percent, and the number of distinct hosts accessing the Website increased by 25 percent—exceeding the 10 percent target for all three performance measures.

EPA established an Agency-wide task force to identify and collect EPA policy, guidance, and interpretive documents that should be made readily available via electronic means. In FY 1999, this effort, the Access to Interpretive Documents Project, identified and converted more than 5,000 paper and 4,000 electronic documents into a consistent electronic format. By the end of FY 2000, EPA intends to make all of its policy, guidance, and interpretive documents available from a central location via the Agency's Website. Achieving this



goal will significantly enhance industry's ability to understand and comply with EPA requirements.

EPA continues to undertake assistance agreements with academic institutions, nonprofit organizations, and minority/low-income communities to further the public's understanding of environmental issues. During FY 1999, EPA awarded over 230 education grants and trained over 8,000 teachers in environmental education. EPA's interagency agreements with other Federal agencies leveraged over \$124,000 in additional support for environmental education activities.

#### **NOXUBEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER AND PROGRAM**

The Starkville School District in Starkville, Mississippi serves more than 4,000 students across a 100+ square-mile area. With financial support from EPA, and in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Mississippi State University, the school district has established an Environmental Education Center and Program in the Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. The Program emphasizes the sustainable use of diminishing resources, fish and wildlife ecology, and the historical significance of the region's natural assets. It is one of few such opportunities in this impoverished area of the country, and plans are now underway to expand the program to 69 school districts and to involve the Choctaw Tribal School System, as well as several private schools.

The Index of Watershed Indicators (IWI) represents an important step in integrating environmental information at the watershed level for use by water resource managers, policy makers, and the public in protecting and enhancing the nation's water resources. The IWI reports on 15 environmental indicators used to characterize the condition and vulnerability of aquatic systems in each of the 2,262 watersheds in the 50 States and Puerto Rico (<http://www.epa.gov/iwi>). During FY 1999, EPA met its goal of updating the IWI and released two new versions, which include updates of six indicators and

three new measures. To enhance the utility of the IWI, EPA also developed an IWI data index, a catalog of maps (Watershed Atlas), and new combinations of data layers (e.g., ecological/human health and ecosystem conditions/vulnerabilities).

#### **Providing Information to Reduce Risks to Human Health and the Environment**

By 2005, EPA's objective is to improve the ability of the public to reduce exposure to specific environmental and human health risks by making current, accurate substance-specific information widely and easily accessible.

*During FY 1999, EPA processed 117,171 Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) chemical release reports from industrial facilities, exceeding its goal to process 110,000 reports, and reduced the time required to make the data available to the public from seven months to five. The Agency also published the annual TRI Data Release Report (APG 46), enabling the public to identify sources of environmental contamination within their communities. The report is available through the TRI homepage (<http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/tri>) and serves as a powerful tool in encouraging facilities to reduce toxic chemical releases.*

EPA issued a proposed rule that would require additional reporting in TRI of toxic chemicals that persist in the environment and accumulate in biological organisms (persistent bioaccumulative toxics, or PBTs). The proposed rule would allow communities to obtain information on releases of particularly dangerous substances that may affect human and ecological health. For example, current regulations only require the reporting of mercury—a highly persistent and bioaccumulative toxic—if a facility manufactures or processes more than 25,000 pounds or if it “otherwise uses” more than 10,000 pounds. The proposed rule would lower the reporting threshold for mercury to ten pounds.

EPA initiated the Acute Exposure Guideline Levels (AEGLs) project at the request of Congress following the 1984 release of methyl isocyanate from a chemical plant in Bhopal, India, which killed and injured thousands of plant workers and residents of the surrounding community. During FY 1999, EPA's National Advisory Committee for

Acute Exposure Guideline Levels for Hazardous Substances (NAC/AEGL) reviewed the scientific literature on 28 extremely hazardous substances and developed over 300 individual exposure limits for these substances. These exposure limits help inform chemical manufacturers, workers, and communities of the potential risks to human health should these chemicals be released.

Another important element of the public's right-to-know is the availability of information documenting regulated entities' compliance with environmental regulations. EPA's enforcement presence works to ensure that industrial facilities comply with regulations; provide accurate and timely reports on toxic chemicals they manufacture, process, or release into the environment; and implement plans to respond to chemical accidents. *In FY 1999, EPA conducted 1,034 inspections under the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA). The goal of 1,300 inspections was missed because of the reduced number of available Senior Environmental Employment inspectors (APG 47).* To minimize the impact of conducting fewer inspections, Headquarters and the Regions worked to strengthen their targeting of the inspections through enhanced analysis of TRI data and targeting inspections to TRI late/non-responders and responses of questionable quality. *Despite missing the EPCRA inspection goal, EPA exceeded its goal of 200 enforcement actions by bringing 285 actions against facilities that violated the statute (APG 47).*

In addition to providing environmental information directly to its customers, EPA works with States and local communities to help them disseminate important information. The Consumer Confidence Report (CCR) rules require water utilities to provide the public with information on potential sources of local drinking water contaminants, actions taken to address water quality violations, and the steps that vulnerable populations can take to avoid potential microbial contaminants (e.g., *Cryptosporidium*).

*EPA achieved its goal of partnering with the States in implementation activities to ensure all water systems are informed of the requirements of the CCR regulation and implementation tools for complying with this rule. Although six States have*

*elected not to actually sign agreements with EPA on implementation of the CCR regulation, all 50 States are engaged and cooperatively participating in the effort (APG 48).* The Agency conducted comprehensive training programs to inform EPA Regional and State drinking water program staff about the CCR regulation. EPA released a series of public service announcements and brochures encouraging consumers to read and understand CCRs (e.g., "Drinking Water and Health: What You Need to Know" and "It's Your Drinking Water: Get to Know It and Protect It"). By October 1999, approximately 56,000 community water systems, serving 92 percent of the U.S. population, were required to publish annual drinking water reports. All of the CCRs issued by large drinking water systems (as of August 31, 1999) are listed on the EPA Website (<http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm>).

Consumers want to know more about pesticides used on foods and how they can reduce their families' potential exposure to these chemicals. In FY 1999, EPA, working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration, published and distributed in both English and Spanish the brochure, "Pesticides and Food." In response to demand, EPA developed a companion Website that builds on information in the printed brochure (<http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/food>). The Agency also released in both English and Spanish the fifth edition of the manual, *Recognition and Management of Pesticide Poisonings*, which provides health care professionals with information on the hazards of pesticides as well as advice on diagnosing and treating poisonings.

### **Enhancing EPA Partners' Abilities to Address Environmental Problems**

By 2005, EPA's objective is to meet or exceed the Agency's customer service standards in providing sound environmental information to Federal, State, local, and Tribal partners to enhance their ability to protect human health and the environment. To coordinate the collection and sharing of environmental data within EPA and with States, other agencies, and the public, EPA created a new Office of Environmental Information. This office will serve as the Agency's focal point for integrating

quality environmental information in ways that inform decisions, improve information management, document performance, and measure success. The new office will work with EPA's many stakeholders and partners to achieve the following:

- Serve as a point of contact for EPA's external partners on information issues and assist them in locating information and services.
- Provide leadership for improving the quality and utility of EPA's data and information, building on Agency successes such as geographic, multimedia, and cross-sectoral approaches.
- Identify current and anticipate future information needs.
- Reduce the burden of collecting information.
- Ensure that the best practical and cost-effective technology is applied to meet EPA's current and future information needs.
- Provide the public with high-quality and useful information on environmental quality, status, and trends.
- Ensure that EPA shares environmental data and information in a consistent, efficient manner that avoids conflicting or confusing messages and promotes understanding.

Another ongoing effort at EPA to enhance the availability of environmental information are the Environmental Monitoring for Public Access and Community Tracking (EMPACT) projects.

*During FY 1999, EPA awarded eight grants to local communities for innovative monitoring research pilot projects, exceeding the Agency's goal of five to seven pilot projects for the program (APG 49).* These grants encourage local communities to track local environmental conditions and communicate results in a timely manner to the public. During FY 1999, EPA awarded a total of 40 EMPACT grants, including the eight Metro grants. The projects provide much more local environmental data than are generally available from EPA databases. EMPACT projects are described in detail on the EMPACT Website (<http://www.epa.gov/empact>). By 2001, the goal of EMPACT is to assist the 86 largest

metropolitan areas in establishing systems to provide their communities with real-time data on local environmental conditions.

#### **EMPACT METRO PROJECT DENTON-DALLAS/FORT WORTH, TX**

With support from an EMPACT Metro grant, the City of Denton has developed a multimedia environmental monitoring system called the Environmental Conditions Online for the Dallas-Fort Worth MetroPLEX (ECOPLEX). ECOPLEX provides environmental information on a multitude of environmental parameters, including UV radiation, ground level ozone, air quality, water quality, and land-use issues. ECOPLEX utilizes innovative and proven environmental monitoring technologies to collect real-time and time-relevant environmental data. The data will inform citizens of the City of Denton, the Elm Fork watershed, and the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area of current, historical, and near-term forecasts of environmental conditions to which the community is exposed. More information can be found at <http://www.ecoplex.unt.edu/>.

### **PROGRAM EVALUATION**

In September 1999, the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report entitled, *Environmental Protection: EPA is Taking Important Steps to Improve Information Management, but Challenges Remain* (GAO/RCED-99-261). This report discusses EPA's recent information-related initiatives and the major management challenges facing EPA's new Office of Environmental Information. The report recommends that EPA take steps to ensure that its environmental and regulatory data are sufficiently complete, compatible, and accurate.

The EMPACT Program also underwent evaluation in FY 1999. In the *State of the Program Report*, EPA summarized the activities and accomplishments of the program and recommended steps to improve it. Based on the *State of the Program Report*, EMPACT took several actions, including producing an on-line tutorial to help interested parties com-

plete EMPACT grant proposals and applications and instituting a weekly e-mail news and activity update. EMPACT also conducted separate project reviews which compared progress toward specific performance measures. Actions taken as a result of these reviews include the following:

- Establishing a contract to provide information management support to projects.
- Developing technology transfer and risk communication “toolsheds” that will identify and facilitate transfer of successful projects and communication strategies.
- Requiring the tracking of approved Quality Assurance Project Plans and Information Management Plans.

Finally, the *Project Status Report* evaluated the projects in each of the 68 current EMPACT cities. EPA used the report results to guide FY 2000 funding decisions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

EPA has made significant strides in furthering Americans' Right-to-Know about the environment and in enhancing their ability to protect human health and the environment. Through joint EPA/State information activities, EMPACT and Environmental Justice grants, drinking water CCRs, and efforts to provide better information about toxic chemicals and pesticides, EPA provides communities and individuals with the information and tools they need to address environmental problems. For instance, informal comments received from users of EPA's Website indicate that the site is becoming increasingly useful for individuals in addressing environmental issues in their personal and professional lives.

In addition, the Agency is working to identify measures that better reflect how well its Website and other information products serve the needs of the public. For example, at the end of FY 1999, EPA received the results of a National Performance Review survey of librarian users of the EPA Website. The Agency will consider improvements to its Website based on the results of this survey. EPA is firmly committed to achieving the goal of

strengthening its information resources for purposes of protecting human health and safeguarding the natural environment, both now and in the future.

## KEY MILESTONES FOR THE FUTURE

- EPA's newly created Office of Environmental Information will address policies for the quality of lab data, including those raised by a recent Office of Inspector General report. OEI will work through the Agency's Quality and Information Council to ensure full implementation of these policies across the Agency.
- The Administrator has committed to make the One Stop Grant program available to all 50 States by FY 2003. Current projections anticipate adding eight States in FY 2000 and five in FY 2001, bringing the total to 38.
- EPA will establish all data elements and the business rules needed to implement the six Reinventing Environmental Information (REI) standards by the end of FY 2000. EPA, the States, and Tribes will implement the initial six data standards in 13 major EPA databases by FY 2003. The Data Standards Council, which includes EPA, States, and Tribal representatives, will set priorities for establishing additional standards beyond the initial ones developed under REI.
- Over the next several years, EPA will use surveys to track consumers' satisfaction with the types of information provided in CCRs on drinking water quality.
- The Agency is initiating a major effort in FY 2000 on information security. EPA will be working with the General Accounting Office to address results of its recent information security review.
- By the end of FY 2001, the EMPACT Program plans to have 40 locally initiated Metro Projects underway in the 86 EMPACT metropolitan areas.
- Working in partnership with the States and Tribes, EPA will establish a single, integrated,



multimedia core of environmental data and information. This core will support a broad data exchange network with the States and Tribes.

- In FY 2000, EPA will take the first steps toward integrated electronic reporting through establishing an interim Central Receiving Facility (CRF) that allows State-to-EPA data transfer and by finalizing an electronic data interchange standard for cross-media environmental compliance reports. By FY 2001, States and regulated companies will have the option of electronically transferring data to the CRF for key compliance reporting programs, and by FY 2003, this capability will extend to all major compliance reporting programs.

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